



“Leading from the Black”: How Black Women Lead Even When Ignored  
Congressional Caucus on Black Women & Girls Roundtable  
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**Centering the Political Power of Black Women**

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To The Honorable Representatives Yvette Clarke, Bonnie Watson Coleman and Robyn Kelly

Thank you for the honor of participating on today's panel and addressing the critical issue of the civic engagement of Black women.

African American women have been a transformative force in the American body politic in recent elections. Sadly, the power of the Black woman's vote has not translated into support, recognition, position or actual power in the Democratic Party at the national or state level. There has been some symbolic Black women in leadership without substantive power. The structural barriers of intersectional racism and sexism have been daunting in preventing Black women from achieving true political power. While celebrating the transformative power of the Black women's vote on election outcomes, this presentation briefly touches upon these infrastructural contradictions and leadership failures while ending in some policy suggestions for advancement.

In 2008 and 2012, African American women voted at levels of 70%, outstripping every other voting bloc. The strength of their 11.4 million ballots cast during each election cycle not only led President Obama to win the presidency twice but down ballot swept Black women into many historic firsts for state and local elected offices.

Notably, African American women voters are distinctively different from White women voters and having a different voting ideology based on both progressive politics and a racial justice lens. African American women as women improve the country's general women's vote contributing to the much discussed "gender gap." Overall, the progressive vote of Black women has impacted our national politic by giving the margin of victory to progressive and liberal candidates of all races. This Black women's vote impact was very manifest in the 2013 off-year Virginia election which propelled Terry McAuliffe to the governorship with 91% of the Black women's vote compared to 38% of the White women's vote.

In 2016, Black women gave 94% of their vote to Hillary Rodham Clinton, her highest margin of achievement with any voting bloc. Although, the presidency was not won, again the power of the Black women's vote was

manifest in firsts at the congressional, state and local elected levels. And the first Black woman Senator took office, ending an almost two decade absence.

Yet, these accomplishments were garnered despite a paltry investment or lack of investment by the Democratic Party and active hostility and voter suppression tactics by state Republican Legislatures.

Black women candidates often are discouraged by democratic operatives, often White men, from running for office. They are told they are unelectable based on stereotypes. Racism is often thinly disguised with sexism as yet another structural barrier. The absence of Black women in the inner circles of state and local leadership compound these obstacles. Black women often don't have the family wealth or family political inheritance to get a jumpstart in running for office. They need party support which often is not forthcoming. However, more and more Black women are determined to run for office. That determination also has to confront the new turnout dilemmas created by voter suppression.

Indeed, in 2016, there was a significant decrease in African American ballots counted for the first time in decades. This decrease from Blacks being 12.9% of all voters in 2012 to 11.9% was attributable not only to an increased turnout in White voters but also to the effectiveness of voter suppression legislation, including photo voter ID, cuts to early voting, reduction in the number of polling sites and inoperable optical scanners and electronic polling books resulting in long lines. Indeed, in North Carolina and other states, members of the state legislatures celebrated the decrease in Black voters due to the success of new voter restrictions. Had voter suppression not been a factor, the presidential election results in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin may have been different.

Despite the active voting by Black women, their vote has not been recognized or valued. Public perception and the Mainstream Media (MSM) even progressive media, rarely feature the progressive and outstanding vote of Black women. Instead the MSM has been fixated on White Trump voters.

Black women are lumped in with either All women or All Blacks without credit for her distinctive contribution to the vote. "Notwithstanding this, political analysts, movement strategists, commentators, and candidates alike rarely acknowledge women of color as distinct political actors, with particular priorities, political preferences, and voting behaviors..." Maya Harris, "Women of Color: A Growing Force In The American Electorate", 2014, Center for American Progress.

Immediately, following the 2016 Election, the Democratic Party focused on how to win Trump Voters, erroneously described as the White Working Class (WCC). No where was there a focus on rewarding, strengthening, positioning or building upon the power of Black women voters. In fact, the DNC held several constituency meetings in early 2017 but none with Black women, its most meaningful and loyal base. This betrayal and neglect reached the boiling point when 20 Black women penned and publicized on May 26, 2017, an open letter to DNC Chairman Tom Perez decrying this failure of leadership.

This letter is telling in outlining the failures of the Democratic Party including the following:

1. Failure of Blacks in top staff positions
2. Failure to invest in Black women candidates

### 3. Lack of Black women in national and state party leadership.

The letter poignantly questioned "Will Black women be among those at the helm, helping to design the policies, craft the message, mobilize troops and lead the way - as policy makers, political strategists, activists and elected officials?"

Since this open letter, Perez met with the Black women leaders and has increased outreach but much remains to be done. But one thing is certain, Black women are not sitting idly by.

Again, in 2017, the strength of the Black women's vote was seen in Virginia and elsewhere in the nation. Again, the Black women's vote at 91% elected Ralph Northam Governor and Justin Fairfax as first Black Lt. Governor, despite a White women's vote of 51% for Ed Gillespie who ran on outright racist appeals. Same in New Jersey with Phil Murphy receiving 94% of the Black women's vote catapulting him to victory as Governor and Sheila Oliver as the state's first Black Lt. Governor.

Around the nation where elections were held Blacks achieved other historic mayoral, state legislative, judicial, sheriff, state attorney and local election victories. These statewide victories in Virginia and New Jersey for Blacks are significant as racially polarized voting has created a concrete ceiling for Blacks to be elected to statewide office. Can this ceiling be cracked elsewhere with new coalitions?

Black women are running for office in record numbers and winning, including Millennials. Black women are flexing their political muscle and making hard demands of both parties. And polling data indicates, they are considering independent party options if the existing parties fail to include their leadership and policies.

#### **LESSONS LEARNED:**

Despite cause for optimism, there are many issues which require attention and new strategies:

1. Black women are not motivated by Moderates who lack a progressive agenda on their main policy concerns of healthcare, criminal justice reform, workplace and wage fairness. Yet, these are the candidates being promoted by some to court Trump voters.
2. New organizing strategies are needed to reach Black suburban voters as deconcentration of Black voting power occurs in inner cities due to gentrification and other mobility.
3. There is a decline in younger Black women's party loyalty to democrats and more are declaring themselves as independents. There may be new opportunities in this development.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. Uplift and Celebrate the Black woman voter!
2. Continue to build Higher Heights and other PACs to support Black women candidates.
3. Create fellowships, internships mentorship programs, and Academies for Black girls in High School and Black women College students to become engaged in civic engagement.
4. Attack frontally stereotypes used to justify blocking or not supporting Black women candidates.

5. Demand more parity for Black women representation in party leadership, especially at state and local level.  
Should there be a "Rooney Rule" adopted?
6. Invest early in Black community education and mobilization.
7. Build conscious programs to help encourage voters to navigate through voter suppression barriers.
8. Fight voter suppression legislation and practices.